

Tips for Organizing a Neighborhood Block Party

Today's modern families are busier than ever. From sporting events to school functions to household chores, parents and children are often rushing from one obligation to another, racing against the clock to squeeze in everything that has to be done. With so many responsibilities, downtime is often in short supply. If you're craving a break from your fast-paced daily routines, you may be surprised to discover a remedy right outside your front door.

When was the last time you spent some time relaxing with the neighbors? We live in an age where over-the-fence conversation and cul-de-sac revelry have given way to emails, text messages, and other forms of "express communication." This summer, unplug your high-tech toys, push aside your day planner, and throw a long, leisurely block party. It's a fun, easy way to turn passing acquaintances into built-in friends, and to form family connections that will endure for seasons to come. In addition to creating camaraderie, cultivating relationships with those who live closest to us promotes a sense of security and solidarity.

So, how to pull it off? Planning a block party is easier than you might think. Follow these quick, simple tips to throw a street soiree that will delight children and adults alike.

Gauge the neighbors' interest. Start by asking your closest neighbors if they'd like to participate, and work your way down the street. The more households that are involved, the bigger and more successful the party will be. Include everyone on the block, not just selected families.

Choose a date. You'll want to give neighbors as much notice as possible, so shoot for a timeframe at least four weeks away. Saturdays are generally the best day of the week to host a block party, since most folks are off work and don't have to get up early the next day.

Pick a locale. If only a few families are interested, you can hold the party in someone's backyard, but if a majority of the neighborhood wants to attend, you may be able to officially close the street and have a bonafide block party in the public space. Contact your local police department for requirements on road closures, as the laws vary widely from region to region. Most city ordinances require a signed petition

from a majority of the neighbors. Another option is to use a nearby park facility.

Plan a menu. Although the standard burgers and hot dogs are always a big hit, consider serving up more unique fare, such as barbecued ribs, pulled pork, or kabobs. Ask everyone to bring a side dish, or you can request monetary donations to be used for the food budget.

Don't forget the party decorations. Make your block party more festive by tying brightly colored balloons to mailboxes, staking tiki torches along the street, placing candle lanterns at the ends of driveways, or hanging white mini-lights in the trees and bushes.

Distribute name tags. This is a great way for neighbors to connect names with faces, and prevents the awkwardness that can come with forgetting someone's name. Include both first and last names.

Plan kid-friendly activities. Depending on the size of your block party, you might consider hanging candy-filled piñatas for the children to swing at, or set up tables for face-painting, coloring contests, relay races, bicycle parades, apple-bobbing, fish ponds, and sprinklers and other water activities. For inspiration, think of the booths you'd find at a typical outdoor festival.

Plan fun events for the adults, too. Some popular summer party favorites include corn hole, horseshoes, ring toss, volleyball, badminton, or lawn darts.

Contact local businesses for donations. If your block party is sizable, neighborhood companies may be willing to volunteer free or discounted products in exchange for the publicity. For instance, a local pizza joint may pony up a few free pies as a means of getting their name out there, or a nearby dry-cleaner's may offer free coupons to use as door prizes.

Consider a theme. This is a great way to boost enthusiasm and involvement among the neighbors. You might choose an '80s theme and ask everyone to dress in their favorite retro outfits, and then play music from that time period. Or if your block party will take place between summer and fall, bill it as an early Halloween celebration and have everyone come in costume. A Hawaiian luau, complete with leis and grass skirts, is another popular theme. Many neighborhoods enjoy

hosting Fourth of July block parties, complete with patriotic decorations and fireworks.

Enlist help. If you live on a smaller street, you can go door-to-door and ask neighbors what food or items they can bring. For larger areas, consider distributing fliers with lists of needed items, such as chairs, tables, utensils, or sports equipment. If you already have everything you need, give them the option of signing up for services, such as helping with setup or cleaning up after the party.

Don't forget the music. Depending on the size of your block party, musical entertainment could be as simple as setting out a stereo in someone's driveway or as elaborate as a hired band on a stage. (If you're using amplified music, keep in mind that you'll likely need a county-issued noise permit.)

Provide plenty of trash receptacles. This will prevent litter from accumulating in the street and will make clean-up much easier. Be sure to include recycling containers in addition to standard garbage cans.

End your party graciously. While it may be tempting to extend the revelry into the wee hours, keep in mind that there will be some neighbors who have small children or need to get to bed a little earlier. As a courtesy, try to wind things down by ten or eleven o'clock.

Last but not least, don't let your new friendships fizzle out after the block party ends. Cultivate your neighborly camaraderie by planning other events throughout the year, such as Christmas parties, New Year's Eve celebrations, and combined children's birthday parties. The ensuing sense of companionship will be well worth the extra effort.